

A little boy was waiting for his mother. As he stood there, he was approached by a man who asked, "Sonny, can you tell me where the Post Office is?" He replied, "Sure! Just go straight down this street two blocks and turn to your right. It's on the left." The man thanked the boy kindly, complimented him on how bright he was, and said, "I'm the new pastor in town. If you and your mommy come to church on Sunday, I'll show you how to get to Heaven." Little Johnny replied with a chuckle: "You're kidding me, right? You can't even find the Post Office."

Well it is my first week in Storrs and I can certainly relate to this pastor. I hope you're not expecting me to tell you how to get to heaven, but I would be happy for directions to the post office. But for now, I'd like to talk about names. What's in a name? We read about Jacob today who has his name changed to Israel. Saul changes to Paul. I believe two teenagers in a play helped sort this out for us when they wondered about the name for a rose – after all, whatever it's called, it still smells as sweet. Isn't that sweet? But then, they die at the end so maybe we don't want to trust them too much. Then there's an episode of WKRP in Cincinnati, a sitcom from about thirty years back, where they get a new DJ for the radio station and a current employee feels intimidated. They introduce themselves and the new guy, big and handsome, says, I always feel you can tell a lot about a person by their name; I'm Steel, what's your name? - and the reply is: Les.

In some cultures, people are named after they develop a personality or behave a certain way. In ours, we pick names that sound nice or maybe are part of our family. My Confirmation name is David. It was my grandfather's name who died right before I was confirmed. We named our daughter Sophia partly because I wanted to name our child Fong and Sue wouldn't go for it, and partly because I was in seminary at the time and Sophia means wisdom in Greek, which can sometimes be exchanged for Holy Spirit theologically. That's why she occasionally floats around the house and we have to tie a string to her toe to keep her in bed at night. For some of us names mean quite a bit. But even if the name isn't important, for most of us, we like that people know our name. In a month, if I'm still forgetting who you are, you might be reasonably upset with me.

Names and naming things are important. Have you ever been in conversation with someone about cancer? Perhaps one of you won't say the word, or someone will only whisper it – cancer. It can be too painful or frightening to say out loud. Or how about the first time we say I love you? But my favorite is when I'm talking to another white person about someone who is black and the other person whispers the word black, like it might be a curse word or we can get in trouble for saying someone – oh my God, happens to be black.

Here at St. Mark's, our patron saint has a gospel and in the gospel of Mark there are many episodes where Jesus encounters demons. In these episodes naming becomes very important. Sometimes Jesus tells the demon to be quiet when it mentions his name. Sometimes he asks for the demon's name. This is because the belief was that by naming something you take away its power or you might give it power depending on the circumstance. We are told in scripture that the name of Jesus is a powerful name. We are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And when we have been baptized in the name of Jesus, we put on the nature of Jesus Christ; we are a new creation. So that if we are Christians, we are like Christ, in a sense we have received a new name.

Athanasius explains this in the 4th century when he says that Jesus is the Word, or in Greek, the Logos, and we are therefore little words, or in Greek, logismoi. So, did you know that you are logismoi? Doesn't sound very pretty in English but every time we remember our true selves as logismoi, and act accordingly, it certainly looks pretty. It looks like the mustard seed that has grown into a tree for all the birds of the air to make a nest. As Christians we strive to be this and in this striving the rubber hits the road. Today we will be saying some names out loud. We will be saying the names of those we love who need our prayers and love to hear them mentioned in prayer. We will be praying for our local and national leaders who need our prayers. Let's see what happens to our hearts when we hold these people up to God. Let's see what happens to our souls when we invite God's presence into their lives. Let's see what happens when the rubber hits the road in our prayer time today.

This idea of rubber hitting the road, the reality of life as a follower of Christ, is what Athanasius was referring to. The Word or name, Logos is mentioned in the prologue of John's gospel: in the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God. And the Logos came down from heaven and dwelt among us. In other words, in Christ we know that God is present with us in all things and at all times. This is what it means when we are named Christians: we make the reality of God's presence known to others, just as Christ has done for us.

If someone encounters us and doesn't walk away feeling a bit more at peace, accepted for who they are, loved as a child of God, we need to wonder if our faith has grown up from a mustard seed into a tree. If we, as individuals and a kind of organization have not lived as Christ has lived, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and loving even our enemies, those who are both inside and outside of St. Mark's, we might want to stop and wonder about our faith. We have after all, heard the name of Jesus calling us either in prayer, through a loved one, or in a life we have always known, and we have answered that call. We have been invited to a wonderful and awesome game and we have stepped onto the field to play. The only question that needs to be answered is: have we stepped onto the field to win?

The world so desperately needs us not only to play at Christianity, but to win. The world is looking to us to be like people who find treasure that is so valuable that we sell all we have to buy it. Like those who have found a pearl of such great value we give up all we have to possess it. The world so desperately is looking to us to be like Christ and demonstrate this in reality by feeding it, nourishing it, bringing peace to it, forgiving it, loving it, all of it – the good, the bad, and the ugly. They want us to step onto that field with them and win this game.

You have been brave enough or foolish enough to invite me here to St. Mark's, Storrs, situated on the campus of the division one U-Conn Huskies, to play this game with you, this game named Christianity. I am happy and grateful to have been called here, St. Mark's. At times we might be ahead and sometimes we might be a few points back. At times it might be exciting and at times it might feel like hard work. But this is the greatest game there is and I intend to win.